

OPEN NINTH:

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM

RE-RELEASE - JUSTICE FOR ALL

ADDRESSING RACIAL INEQUITY IN THE COURTS

EPISODE 170

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(Music)

NARRATOR: Welcome to another episode of “Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom” in the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida.

And now here’s your host, Chief Judge Don Myers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. I’m here today with Edwin Bell, the Director of Racial Justice, Equity and Inclusion for the National Center for State Courts. The center recently created this position to address implicit and explicit racial prejudices within the justice system and to examine what systemic changes need to be made to ensure equality under the law. Edwin brings 15 years of court experience to the position, giving him an insight into the challenges inherent in addressing these issues. Thanks so much for joining me, Edwin. It’s great to have you here.

MR. BELL: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, we’re excited about this conversation. I look forward to it. It’s such a timely and important one and I imagine that’s a part of the reason that you have a new position to be working within as well.

MR. BELL: Absolutely. You know, it’s one of those things that I couldn’t have planned for, you know, the President and CEO of the National Center for State Courts, Mary McQueen can be very persuasive.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That is -- that is the understatement of the year. For our listeners who don’t know Mary, my predecessor, Judge Lauten did a podcast with Mary McQueen. You need to listen to it to appreciate how persuasive and how powerful Mary is.

MR. BELL: Absolutely. I was glad to have gotten the call, you know, the inquiry from her to sort of gauge my interest in this newly created role, which was, in part, driven by the desires of the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators to seek out ways to improve the justice system that we all work in, specifically the judicial branch portion of the justice system, and identify where we have issues with respect to race, justice and any number of ways. Whether that's with court cases specifically, whether that's with processes and procedures that are typical in many courthouses around this country or in the hiring ranks, whether it has something to do with the capacity of black and brown and other people of color having the ability to work within this particular system as a career choice. And so there are a number of different things that I'm going to be working on while I'm in this particular role and we'll see how things manifest over the coming years.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, let's talk a little bit about your path to get where you are. Tell us just in a nutshell a little bit about your education and then we'll kind of move from there into your experience in the court system itself.

MR. BELL: Okay. Well, I have an undergraduate bachelor's degree from Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. Got a master's in business because in addition to my passion for the justice system as it is, I also have a businessman's mentality. In fact, we had a former governor who is now Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue and he had talked about government operating more like a business. And so I said, huh, that's an interesting spin because government is not like business however government is big business with respect to the lives of the people that we impact. And so I went, instead of most of my friends getting law degrees or getting public administration degrees or criminology degrees, I went and got an MBA, which was extremely challenging for me but it helped me to put some things into perspective with

respect to my work and in my career in the justice system. And then some time later, I became a fellow of the Institute for Court Management, which is a part of the National Center for State Courts.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And how does that happen? How did you discern that that was your interest and decide to pursue that opportunity?

MR. BELL: Well, it was sort of something that occurred over time, you know, as a person in a developing career, I spent probably my first 14 years in state government in a number of different capacities. And when I landed at the administrative office of the courts, and understanding both the nuances and the differences of the judicial branch side of the house where previously I had been in the executive branch, I figured that I needed to grow and learn more in order to be effective, especially if my path was going to be to the local trial court level which it ultimately took me there. So I began you know, when opportunities presented themselves for course work, taking court management courses, obviously trainings, conferences, all of that, I took it all in. I mean, it was hook-line and sinker. I was very, very interested, and went further and further, and deeper and deeper as many courses as I could take until ultimately the time came for me to make a personal decision as to whether or not I would pursue the fellowship which I did. And here I am today.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So you served in the role as a deputy court administrator in the Stone Mountain Judicial Circuit.

MR. BELL: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tell us just in a nutshell again a little bit about what that work involves.